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ABSTRACT

Sixty-one graduate student teachers (from seven urban, rural, and suburban districts) responded to five questions relating to how they viewed their involvement and importance in making decisions in the operation of their schools. Questions were designed by 14 teachers who met twice for about 2 hours each meeting. This development group believed that most teachers would state that they were not adequately involved because it was believed that administrators and Boards of Education did not make teacher involvement in such questions a priority. Question 1 dealt with the purpose of inservice days; questions 2, 3, and 4 with curricular concerns; and question 5 with teacher knowledge of official channels available to them for their curricular concerns. Results indicated that 95 per cent of teachers did not feel involved, 64 per cent did not know of any gaps in teaching/testing programs, 51 per cent believed that children were not being educated to their full potential and that there were curriculum problems, and 44 per cent indicated no channel or forum for voicing curricular concerns. Overall findings suggested that many teachers are out of the decision making loop, to the detriment of their students. (NAV)

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How Public School Teachers View Their Involvement in the Decision Making Process

A paper presented at the

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November, 1995

Anaheim, CA.

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Abstract

How public school teachers view their involvement in the decision making process.

Sixty-one teachers were asked to respond to five questions relative to how they view their involvement and importance in making decisions involving the operation of their schools. The teachers responded to items related to the extent of their involvement and to items related to their involvement in some critical areas.

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Introduction

All workers, including teachers, are happier when they are legitimately involved in decisions that affect them and their organizations. Teachers, in particular, want to be involved, because they view themselves as being "in the trenches."

In actuality, the teachers "in the trenches" have taken some bad raps. Teachers in our graduate classes complain that community and government leaders like to "beat up on" teachers, and this is happening more and more frequently. Perhaps it is because teachers are easy targets who don't have adept defenders. Perhaps it is because teachers are caught in the middle of a political war, and it is convenient to criticize teachers rather than acknowledge that there are significant social problems surrounding the education enterprise.

Larry Cuban (1992) says that there is a "groupthink" that believes or claims that the buying power of the dollar is shrinking because of public education. Worker productivity is declining because of public education. Unemployment is rising because of public education. The economy is a major national problem because of public education.

John Akers, Chairman of IBM, said in a New York Times advertisement that education is a social concern and a major economic issue. It is interesting that for Mr. Akers education is a social issue, and he makes no mention of the status of the American family as a social issue.

Jim Fox (1993) cites a quote by Andy Rooney of "60 Minutes," who said, "We don't need better schools; we don't need better teachers; we need better parents!" Mr. Fox, who is a retired journalist in St. Louis, believes that public schools are doing many

things correctly. He claims that many public school students achieve "very high" scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Tests and earn such awards as National Merit Scholarships. And the critics of public education, such as John Akers, choose to ignore these accomplishments.

Mr. Fox believes that a much more logical remedy than vouchers would be for public school parents to take a hand in the education of their children. He further advocates some "radical" proposals: that parents insist that children do their homework; that daily attendance be considered standard operating procedure; and that parents accept some of the blame if their children encounter problems.

It appears that Mr. Fox has exposed two researchable questions:

1. Are schools where parents insist that homework be done, teachers respected and obeyed, and daily attendance a SOP more effective than schools where these conditions are absent?

2. Are children whose parents insist that homework be done, teachers respected and obeyed, and daily attendance a SOP more effective or "better" students than those whose parents do not insist on these conditions?

Educators probably know the answers to these questions without conducting the research. However, it would be interesting to see just how much more effective the schools and children with insisting parents are.

Ernest Boyer (1991) provided some interesting insights into the "education" problem. Mr. Boyer claims that children are being placed last in society's pecking order. Millions of children are physically and emotionally disadvantaged in ways that severely

restrict their capacity to learn. It is necessary to recognize that the family is more imperiled than the school. Further, many of our schools' problems are traceable to events that precede the school years, and possibly even birth itself.

Some of the recommendations for change made by critics of the public schools seem to have merit. As pointed out by Cuban (1992), a cookbook recipe for school reform has begun to emerge from the public pronouncements of public and private officials. Two of the proposals seem particularly appropriate: decentralize operations so that the managers and employees who actually make a product decide how it is to be done, and then hold those managers and employees responsible for the outcome.

It seems that in many educational environments the managers and employees are held responsible, but they are not given the opportunity to determine "how it is to be done." In other words, advice from the trenches is not sought. This applies especially to teachers more so than to principals.

Research questions

In order to determine if school authorities are following the advice of the reformers, and allowing teachers to determine "how it should be done," teachers were asked to respond to five questions:

1. Do you believe that you are adequately involved in the overall planning of your school's operation?

2. Are there any "gaps" in your school's teaching/testing program?

3. Is each child in your classes being educated to his/her full potential?

4. Have you noticed any problems of curricular articulation or coordination in your classes?

5. Do you have an official channel or forum for voicing your curricular concerns?

The questions were designed by 14 teachers who participated on a voluntary basis. Two meetings were conducted with the group, and each meeting lasted about two hours. The group believed that most teachers would indicate that they are not adequately involved because "extensive" involvement of teachers is usually not something that administrators and boards make a priority. It is also something that can be difficult to achieve given teacher schedules and tight budgets.

Inservice days can be used for designing "how it is to be done," but usually they are not. Usually inservice days are used to show teachers how to do it. Another reason for asking the question was to determine the extent to which teachers felt left out.

Questions 2, 3, and 4 represent serious areas of curricular concern that can be eliminated if teachers are adequately/actively involved in the overall planning of their school's operation. If a large number of teachers indicate that "gaps" exist (#2), and/or that each child is not being educated to his/her full potential (#3), and/or there are problems of curricular articulation or coordination, this will further indicate that there is a lack of teacher involvement. Question #5 will indicate if teachers have been advised that they have an official channel for calling attention to their curricular concerns.

Methodology

The questionnaires were completed during the summer, 1995 by 61 students in graduate classes. The data are reported in percents, and there was no attempt to

analyze the data by demographic characteristics. The 61 teachers represent a total of seven urban, suburban, and rural districts.

Results

The responses to question #1 regarding whether or not teachers believed they were adequately involved in planning their school's operation were not surprising. Approximately 95 percent of the teachers expressed the opinion that were not adequately involved. This was a forced choice item; the only choices were "yes" and "no." If the respondents had been given more choices, such as "sometimes," the results might have bene different. These data are in Table 1.

Question #2 asked if the teaches were aware of "gaps" in their teaching/testing programs. Approximately 64 percent said they were not aware of any "gaps," but 36 percent said they were aware of "gaps." Because testing is a high stakes activity and schools and teachers are publicly criticized for students' low test scores, 36 percent is actually a rather large number. It seems appropriate that school officials would have a vested interest in reducing this percent to zero. The data for question 2 are in Table 2.

Question #3 was concerned with whether or not each child in the teachers' classes was being educated to his/her full potential. The responses to this question were almost even -- 49 percent said "yes," and 51 percent said "no." The fact that 51 percent indicated that not each child is being educated to his/her full potential should be of interest to school officials. If, in fact, a large number of students are not being educated to their full potential, it could have legal, philosophical, and moral implications. It seems

like this type of problem that can be addressed by asking teachers the question "how should it be done?" The data related to this question are in Table 3.

The possible presence of any problems related to curricular articulation or coordination is addressed in question #4. Teachers were given an opportunity to respond "yes," "no," or "don't know." The "don't know" category was included because it is possible that some of the teachers had not analyzed their curriculum in terms of articulation and/or coordination. Approximately 51 percent of the teachers indicated that they recognized curricular articulation and/or coordination problems. The fact that such a large percent observed problems could be an indication that their curricula were implemented from the top, possibly by board or administrative decree. It also possible that if teacher committees developed or selected the curricula that the committees were not representative of the entire faculty. This, again, is a problem that is easily correctable if administrators are serious about involving teachers in "how it should be done." These data are in Table 4.

Question #5 asked teachers if they have an official channel or forum for voicing curricular concerns. Approximately 44 percent indicated that they have no channel or forum. One of the possible interpretations for this large percent is that school officials are not actively or honestly interested in teachers' opinions. It is also possible that some of the 44 percent do have a channel or forum but are unaware of its existence. If this is the case, then it is a negative reflection on administrators for failing to communicate.

Summary and future research

Teachers and school officials have been under the constant and severe criticism since about 1983 when A Nation at Risk was published and warned the American people about a "rising tide of mediocrity" in our schools. School district and state officials have tried to address this problem in various ways, e.g., the essential schools movement, the effective schools movement, OBE. Apparently, none of the attempts have been able to satisfy education's critics.

Cuban (1992) has pointed out some of the reforms which have been instituted by Ford, IBM, and Xerox, namely decentralize operations so that managers and employees decide how to make a product, and then hold the managers and employees responsible. If the criticism is to continue, then critics should be aware of the degree to which the concept of letting employees decide "how to make it" is being used. Approximately 95 percent of the teachers surveyed indicated that they are not adequately involved in planning their school's operation (question #1). While there can be some varying interpretations regarding what is adequate, it cannot be denied that the 95 percent figure indicates that an unhealthy number of teachers believe they are out of the loop or feel alienated from the decision making process.

This interpretation is supported by the data related to question #5, in which teachers expressed their opinions as to whether or not they have a channel or forum for voicing their curricular concerns. Approximately 44 percent said they did not, and this reinforces the notion that teachers' involvement in the "how to make it" aspect is weak.

While 44 percent is not a majority, it is substantial enough to conclude that adequate involvement in planning is not a widespread and compelling condition in education.

Question #2 asked teachers if they were aware of any teaching/testing "gaps." The fact that 36 percent said they were aware of "gaps" indicates that a large number of teachers were probably not involved in determining the testing program, because it is not logical that these teachers would want skills tested before they are taught. Advice received from "adequately" involved teachers would surely reduce the gaps to zero.

Teachers responses to question #3 regarding if each student is being educated to his/her full potential indicates that 51 percent of teachers believe that a some children are not being educated to their full potential. And the responses to question #4 regarding curriculum articulation and coordination, wherein 51 percent have observed problems, indicate that a sincere effort should be made by school officials to involve teachers in solving these problems.

When viewed as a whole, the data related to all five questions point to the distinct possibility that many teachers are out of the decision making loop, and this is working to the detriment of students. Most critical are the data related to questions #1 and #5 which indicate that a substantial percentage of teachers believe they are not adequately involved, and they have no official channel or forum for communicating problems or for telling "how it should be done."

Future research can profitably pursue some areas that are not included here, such as, whether or not teachers reported "gaps"; whether or not failure to educate some to their full potential was reported; and whether or not curricular articulation and

coordination problems were reported. It would also be interesting to learn, with regard to the three issues cited above ("gaps," full potential, and articulation and coordination), how many instances were reported and what kinds of actions were taken.

TABLE 1

Do you believe that you are adequately involved in the overall planning of your school's operation?

	Percent	No. of responses
Yes	5	3
No	95	58
Total	100	61

TABLE 2

Are there any gaps in your teaching/testing program?

	Percent	No. of responses
Yes	36	22
No	64	39
Total	100	61

TABLE 3

Is each child in your classes being educated to his/her full potential?

	Percent	No. of responses
Yes	49	30
No	51	31
Total	100	61

TABLE 4

Have you noticed any problem(s) of curricular articulation or coordination in your classes?

	Percent	No. of responses
Yes	51	31
No	36	22
Don't know	13	8
Total	100	61

TABLE 5

Do you have an official channel or forum for voicing your curricular concerns?

	Percent	No. of responses
Yes	56	34
No	44	27
Total	100	61

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